

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



This is the published version of this journal article:

[Flew, Terry](#) (2010) Comparative communication research : Australian and New Zealand communication research in an international context. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, pp. 5-12.

© Copyright 2010 Terry Flew

COMPARATIVE COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Abstract

This article raises the question of whether comparative national models of communications research can be developed along the lines of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) analysis of comparative media policy, or the work of Perraton and Clift (2004) on comparative national capitalisms. Taking communications research in Australia and New Zealand as its starting point, the article considers what might be the relevant variables in shaping an 'intellectual milieu' for communications research in these countries, compared with those of Europe, North America and Asia. Some possibly relevant variables include: type of media system (e.g. how significant is public service media?); political culture (e.g. are there significant left-of-centre political parties?); dominant intellectual traditions; level and types of research funding; the overall structure of the higher education system; and where communications sits within it. In considering whether such an exercise can or should be undertaken, we can also evaluate, as Hallin and Mancini do, the significance of potentially homogenising forces. These would include globalisation, new media technologies, and the rise of a global 'audit culture'. The article raises these issues as questions that emerge when we consider, as Curran and Park (2000) and Thussu (2009) have proposed, what a 'de-Westernized' media and communications research paradigm may look like.

The Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2010. It was established as the Australian Communication Association (ACA) in 1980, and became a trans-Tasman organisation in 1994. There is an excellent online resource on ANZCA's history, with Steven Maras having gathered together a history of ANZCA that includes a bibliography of key papers and overviews of Australian and New Zealand communications studies (www.anzca.net/about-anzca/dossier.html). Among the key references on Australian communication studies are Peter Putnis's early history published in *Media, Culture and Society* (Putnis, 1986), Graeme Turner's overview of the field for the Australian Academy of the Humanities (Turner, 1998), the study undertaken for the Federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs by Peter Putnis and his colleagues at the University of Canberra (Putnis et al., 2002), Steven Maras's analyses based on his archival research and interviews with former ANZCA presidents (Maras, 2003, 2004, 2006), Helen Wilson's editorial account of the history of *Media International Australia* (Wilson, 2006) and the

overviews of the field and the dominant theoretical traditions in Australia identified in the various editions of Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner's *Media and Communications in Australia* textbook (Cunningham and Turner, 2010; Sinclair, 2010). Moreover, there are extensive histories of Australian cultural studies, including the introductions to the anthologies by John Frow and Meaghan Morris (1993) and Graeme Turner (1993), as well as John Frow's more recent genealogical account of the field's development (Frow, 2005), my own account of the critical communication research tradition in Australia (Flew, 2004a) and the collection of essays edited by Gerard Goggin on the internet in Australia (Goggin, 2004).

The essays in this collection by Stuart Cunningham and Sue Turnbull make important additions to this Australian literature, while the essays by Donald Matheson and Alison Henderson, Mary Simpson and Kay Weaver make vital contributions to the arguably less well-documented history of New Zealand communications research. Three of these papers (Cunningham; Turnbull; Henderson et al.) were presented at the 60th annual International Communication Association (ICA) conference held in Singapore from 22–26 June 2010. An ICA conference held in the Asia-Pacific region provided a good opportunity to showcase Australian and New Zealand media and communication research traditions to North American and European delegates unfamiliar with this work. For me, this exercise also raised the question of what it means to think about a research tradition spatially rather than historically. In other words, rather than accounting for how the field has developed in Australia and/or New Zealand from the 1980s to the present day, what would it mean to consider the institutional structures and intellectual flows that shape distinctive national communication research frameworks, and how historical trends – which in Australia would include developments such as the rise of cultural studies in the 1980s, the 'cultural policy moment' of the 1990s, the challenges of the internet and media convergence, the relationship to professional fields such as journalism and public relations, the growth of media studies in secondary school education and the promotion of creative industries in the 2000s – intersect with these more location-specific factors. Interest in this line of inquiry was further prompted by my participation in a pre-ICA roundtable hosted by the Communication Association of Japan (CAJ), where representatives of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the Chinese Communication Association (CCA), as well as myself as President of ANZCA, reflected on 'The State of Communication Research in the (Non-US) World'. The 'non-US' element was particularly significant in this context: for communication researchers in Japan and Taiwan, to take two examples, the early years of communication research involved large numbers of graduate students returning from the United States and bringing back the latest influential North American mass communication research paradigms. For these researchers, developing national communication research traditions involved a 'decolonisation of the mind' and a turn away from Eurocentric research models, with some authors such as Yoshitaka Miike proposing alternative 'Asiacentric' research models (Miike, 2010).

The purpose of such an exercise is not to engage in excoriating postcolonial critique of metropolitan systems of knowledge, nor is it to develop a cultural nationalist alternative to intellectual neo-colonialism.¹ Rather, it is to stimulate

thinking about what would be involved in developing comparative frameworks for understanding similarities and differences between national communication research traditions. It would be work in the tradition of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), which – despite criticisms that it fails to extend its view beyond Europe and North America – sets out ways of thinking about not only how, but also why, the historical and institutional frameworks of national media systems generate path dependencies that provide a counterpoint to claims about globalisation triggering media policy convergence. A similar research trajectory was identified in the *De-Westernizing Media Studies* collection (Curran and Park, 2000), where it was proposed that more fine-grained institutional and historical analyses of media systems were required than those assumed in globalisation theories. Such a project is also influenced by comparative studies of national capitalisms (Perraton and Clift, 2004), where it is proposed that histories, state agencies and institutions matter to the point whereby a common set of experiences associated with globalisation, which range from financial speculation to the internet to the circulation of neo-liberal ideologies, is nonetheless mediated through these national frames in ways that point to dynamic systems evolution, but not to convergence around a single model. In this context, we can also note Jeremy Tunstall's (2008) controversial assertion that the high point of North American mass communications paradigms has passed, and we are living in a world where national differences between media systems are becoming more, not less, important.

Bases of institutional differentiation

In *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini identified three media system models that existed as ideal types, which some countries most closely resembled: (1) the *polarised pluralist* model associated with Southern European nations (Greece, Spain, Italy); (2) the *democratic corporatist* model associated with the Scandinavian nations but also countries such as Germany and the Netherlands; and (3) the *liberal* model, associated with the United States, Canada and – to a lesser extent – Great Britain and Ireland. They put forward four variables as the basis for these comparative distinctions:

1. press circulation within nations and how early a mass press was developed;
2. the extent to which political parallelism exists between political organisations and media outlets (especially newspapers);
3. the extent of influence of ideas associated with journalistic professionalism;
4. the role of the state in regulating the media system, and particularly the significance of public broadcasting in the overall media ecology.

For the purposes of this exercise, I wish to propose five comparative variables that help to shape an intellectual milieu for communication research in Australia and New Zealand, and how it may compare with communication research traditions in Europe, North America and Asia:

1. the nature of the *media system*, and particularly the relative significance of public broadcasting and the extent of state regulation of commercial media;

-
2. the nature of the *political culture*, particularly the nature and significance of left-of-centre parties in the political system and how this shapes intellectual culture;
 3. the *dominant intellectual traditions*, particularly in relation to communication and associated fields such as political economy and cultural studies;
 4. the *level and types of research funding*, and whether they promote large-scale projects, collaboration with industry, research for governments and cross-institutional networking;
 5. the overall structure of the *national higher education system*, and where communication sits within it. In particular, is communication viewed as both a research and teaching field, or is it seen as primarily associated with professional training?

Media systems

Raymond Williams (1974) developed his concepts of segmentation and flow based upon the experience of being an experienced British TV critic who found the experience of viewing US television disruptive, as he was unfamiliar with the extent to which the narrative of TV programs was continually disrupted by advertisements. It was a pointer to how the experience of watching television can vary from one place to another, even if other factors – such as the English language – may be shared, because of the differences between a highly regulated British system where the BBC played a leading role in shaping the system, compared to a much less-regulated US system, where the commercial sector dominates and the PBS is utterly marginal to the overall media ecology.

The Australian broadcast television system has displayed considerable continuity over time, with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) playing a less central role than the BBC in the United Kingdom, but being a highly significant element in the overall system; the ABC's importance may be increasing over the 2000s with its innovative role in online media and the advantages offered by multi-channelling. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has few parallels elsewhere in the world, and gives debates about multiculturalism a central role in Australian media policy. By contrast, the New Zealand system was radically transformed over the 1980s and 1990s, in ways that largely marginalised a public service remit within the system. At the same time, Maori Television plays a vital role in the New Zealand system, whereas Indigenous TV is comparatively marginal in Australia, which is indicative of the stronger commitments to Maori rights and biculturalism found in New Zealand.

Political culture

Both Australia and New Zealand have long-established Labor Parties with strong links to the trade union movement, but which have never really been socialist or even necessarily social democratic parties. In both countries, Labor governments were criticised for going too far down the path of deregulatory free market economics in the 1980s and early 1990s, although such policies may have been precursors of what would become known as the 'New Labour' experiment of the Blair and Brown governments in the United Kingdom after 1997 (Frankel, 1997; Johnson, 2000). At any rate, fragmentation of the traditional Labor vote led to the

emergence of significant new parties to Labor's left, most notably The Greens. The political culture of both countries therefore tends to be more pragmatic and less ideological than would be the case in European countries with stronger socialist, social-democratic or Marxist-based parties, and Australia was seen from the early twentieth century as an exemplar of what was termed 'socialism without doctrines' – or, as V.I. Lenin put it, a 'liberal-bourgeois party' (Beliharz, 1994). This has made it difficult to develop what Terry Eagleton (1984) refers to as a 'counter-public sphere', where critical intellectuals have institutionalised relations to oppositional social and political movements. At the same time, the Labor Parties are to the left of the US Democratic Party, and the relationship with the trade union movement gives the politics of organised labour more of a presence than in the US system, sometimes in tension with social movement activism more associated with the post-1960s 'New Left'.

Dominant intellectual traditions

One of the relevant features of communication studies in Australia is that the field rose to prominence in the 1970s alongside radical political economy and cultural studies. This means that a positivist mass communications tradition had not really developed before it could be radicalised, in contrast to the North American experience. I have elsewhere noted that 'critical media and communications research as it developed in Australia from 1975 was a distinct amalgam of radical populism and high theory' (Flew, 2004a: 36), and this combination continues to be found in cultural studies since it emerged in the 1980s, as seen in emblematic texts of the era such as *Myths of Oz* (Fiske et al., 1987). While there was a formal split between communication studies and cultural studies in Australia in the 1980s, many researchers would today move easily between the two fields, and there is no great intellectual divide between a journal such as *Media International Australia*, at the 'communication' end of the spectrum, and *Continuum*, at the 'cultural studies' end.

While high theory and radical politics have represented one set of intellectual influences in Australia, there has also existed a strong tradition of more pragmatic engagements with industry and government that are nonetheless theoretically informed. This was seen in the *cultural policy debate* of the 1990s, where it was proposed that cultural criticism needed to become less lofty and oppositional and develop what Stuart Cunningham referred to as 'a reformist vocation within the terms of a social democratic politics' (Cunningham, 1992: 11). This was criticised at the time by neo-Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson and Jim McGuigan as a sellout of the critical vocation of the humanities intellectual, and such criticisms re-emerged in the 2000s around the promotion of *creative industries* as a way of aligning media and cultural studies to national innovation and post-industrial economic growth agendas (Hartley, 2005). The combination of high theory and pragmatic politics does appear to be a distinctively Australian turn in communication, media and cultural studies, as Stuart Cunningham argues in this issue of *MIA*.

Level and types of research funding

One of the big changes in Australian communication, media and cultural studies over the last 20 years has been its greatly increased access to research funding. A

range of major collaborative initiatives in the Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) panel of the Australian Research Council (ARC) have been developed, including the Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, the Cultural Research Network and the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation. When these are combined with the high-profile initiatives of university-based research centres such as the University of Queensland's Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies and the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Cultural Research, it can be seen how this area has come to be identified as one of the HCA fields of research in which Australia has international leadership, and the corollary is a steady increase in the ability of researchers in these field to attract ARC funding through its Discovery and Linkages grant programs (Flew et al., 2007). There is a significant difference between Australia and New Zealand in the level of research funding available in the HCA sector, the diversity of sources through which such funding can be accessed (the ARC Linkages program promotes collaboration with industry and government agencies, for instance) and the willingness to develop cross-institutional partnerships through large-scale research centres that can concentrate resources and leverage further funding opportunities. In his article in this issue of *MIA*, Donald Matheson identifies this as an important weakness in the communications research field in New Zealand.

Communication in the higher education system

Putnis et al. (2002) identify that communication was one of the major beneficiaries of the reform and institutional amalgamation era in Australian universities, with enrolments trebling between 1989 and 2001. While the largest programs were typically associated with newer universities, and particularly the Universities of Technology such as QUT, RMIT, UTS and Curtin, recent work has identified that continuing growth over the 2000s has increasingly been driven by new programs at the more traditional 'Group of Eight' Australian universities, to the point where 'media and communications [is] ... the most popular field of study in the broad humanities' (Cunningham and Turner, 2010: 10). One related consequence has been a rapid growth in the number of research higher degree students undertaking PhDs and Masters degrees in media and communication and related fields. While this growth in media and communications, and the related shift towards it, becoming a more research-intensive field in Australia has not been without its tensions – most notably with the 'Media Wars' controversies of the late 1990s between media and cultural studies and journalism (Flew and Sternberg, 1999; Flew et al., 2007) – it has pushed the field to the forefront of the 'New Humanities' in Australia (Flew, 2004b). I am not aware of comparable data in the New Zealand case, but the contributions to this collection by Henderson et al. and Matheson suggest that the continuing divide between the universities and the institutes and polytechnics, with the latter unable to grant research degrees, overlaps with tensions between 'critical' humanities scholarship and more 'practical' professional education to set limits to the expansiveness of communication as a research field in the New Zealand higher education system.

I have sought in this article to provide some coordinates for what hopefully may be ongoing comparative research into communication scholarship in different parts of the world, using Australia and New Zealand as case studies. Pointing to forces that continue to generate divergence between nations is not to deny the significance

of forces that promote a degree of global convergence. Indeed, one of the features of globalisation is that forces promoting homogeneity and heterogeneity, as well as deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, coexist within shifting layers of social space: there is no simple shift from national to global systems (Tomlinson, 2007). Among the forces likely to promote convergence in communications research are the impact of digital media technologies on scholarly publishing (which is only in its early stages, compared with the impact of the internet on other media), the role played by what Andy Pratt (2009) terms ‘travelling theories’ in internationalising particular intellectual concepts and research paradigms, and the ways in which new forms of academic audit culture such as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) or the Performance-Based Research Fund in New Zealand promote publication in international rather than nationally based academic journals. However, we also need to remember that such globalising pressures are not new. For the generation of scholars from countries such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan who made the pilgrimages to the United States for graduate communication education, or indeed for those Australians and New Zealanders who went to the United States or the United Kingdom for similar reasons, the pressures and forces associated with globalisation are not new in our field. What the collection of essays in this edition of *Media International Australia* – developed at the time of ANZCA’s 30th anniversary – provides us with are some marker points for the process of thinking spatially about communication research at a time when the pull of the global can appear to be uniquely pre-eminent.

Note

- ¹ Turner (1992) provides a comprehensive analysis of the scope and limitations of an ‘Australian’ cultural studies counterposed with a dominant British cultural studies tradition.

References

- Beilharz, Peter 1994, *Transforming Labor: Labour Tradition and the Labor Decade in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Cunningham, Stuart 1992, *Framing Culture: Criticism and Policy in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Cunningham, Stuart and Turner, Graeme 2010, ‘Introduction: The Media and Communications Today’, in S. Cunningham and G. Turner (eds), *The Media and Communications in Australia*, 3rd ed., Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 1–11.
- Curran, James and Park, Myung-Jin 2000, ‘Beyond Globalization Theory’, in J. Curran and M.-J. Park (eds), *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, Routledge, London, pp. 3–18.
- Eagleton, Terry 1984, *The Function of Criticism*, Verso, London.
- Fiske, John, Hodge, Bob and Turner, Graeme 1987, *Myths of Oz*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Flew, Terry 2004a, ‘Critical Communications Research in Australia: From Radical Populism to Creative Industries’, *Javnost*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 31–46.
- 2004b, ‘Media and Communication’, in R. Wissler, B. Haseman, S.-A. Wallace and M. Keane (eds), *Innovation in Australian Arts, Media and Design*, Post Pressed, Flaxton, pp. 111–22.
- Flew, Terry and Sternberg, Jason 1999, ‘Media Wars: Media Studies and Journalism Education’, *Media International Australia*, no. 99, pp. 9–14.
- Flew, Terry, Sternberg, Jason and Adams, Debra 2007, ‘Revisiting the “Media Wars” Debates’, *Australian Journal of Communication*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 1–27.
- Frankel, Boris 1997, ‘Beyond Labourism and Socialism: How the Australian Labor Party Developed the Model of “New Labour”’, *New Left Review*, no. 192, pp. 3–31.

-
- Frow, John 2005, 'Australian Cultural Studies: Theory, Story, History', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 37, www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-December-2005/frow.html.
- Frow, John and Morris, Meaghan 1993, 'Introduction', in J. Frow and M. Morris (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. i–xxiv.
- Goggin, Gerard (ed.) 2004, *Virtual Nation: The Internet in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Hallin, Daniel and Mancini, Paolo 2004, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hartley, John 2005, 'Introduction', in J. Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, pp. 1–43.
- Johnson, Carol 2000, *Governing Change: Keating to Howard*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.
- Maras, Steven 2003, 'Presidents Reflect on ANZCA: Past and Future', *Australian Journal of Communication*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 1–24.
- 2004, 'Thinking about the History of ANZCA: An Australian Perspective', *Australian Journal of Communication*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 13–51.
- 2006, 'The Emergence of Communication Studies in Australia as "Curriculum Idea"', *Australian Journal of Communication*, vol. 33, nos 2–3, pp. 43–62.
- Miike, Yoshitake 2010, 'An Anatomy of Eurocentrism in Communication Scholarship: The Role of Asiaticity in De-Westernizing Theory and Research', *China Media Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1–11.
- Perraton, Jonathon and Clift, Ben 2004, 'So Where are National Capitalisms Now?', in J. Perraton and B. Clift (eds), *Where are National Capitalisms Now?*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 195–260.
- Pratt, Andy 2009, 'Policy Transfer and the Field of the Cultural and Creative Industries: What Can Be Learned from Europe?', in L. Kong and J. O'Connor (eds), *Creative Economies, Creative Cities: Asian-European Perspectives*, Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 9–24.
- Putnis, Peter 1986, 'Communication Studies in Australia: Paradigms and Contexts', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 143–57.
- Putnis, Peter, Axford, Barbara, Watson, Louise and Blood, Warwick 2002, *Communication and Media Studies in Australian Universities: An Investigation into the Growth, Status and Future of this Field of Study*, Division of Communication and Education, University of Canberra, Canberra.
- Sinclair, John 2010, 'The Media and Communications: Theoretical Traditions', in S. Cunningham and G. Turner (eds), *The Media and Communications in Australia*, 3rd ed., Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 15–29.
- Tomlinson, John 2007, 'Cultural Globalization', in G. Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, pp. 352–66.
- Tunstall, Jeremy 2008, *The Media Were American: U.S. Mass Media in Decline*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Turner, Graeme 1992, '"It Works for Me": British Cultural Studies, Australian Cultural Studies, Australian Film', in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York, pp. 640–52.
- (ed.) 1993, *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, Routledge, London.
- 1998, 'Media and Communication Studies', in *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century, Volume Two: Discipline Surveys*, prepared by a Reference Group for the Australian Academy of the Humanities, pp. 181–90.
- Williams, Raymond 1974, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Fontana, London.
- Wilson, Helen 2006, 'Thirty Years of MIA: A Commemorative Editorial', *Media International Australia*, no. 119, pp. 3–20.

Terry Flew is Professor of Media and Communication in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology, and President of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association 2009–10. He is the author of *Understanding Global Media* (Palgrave, 2007), *New Media: An Introduction* (3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2008) and *The Creative Industries, Culture and Policy* (Sage, 2011, forthcoming).